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XXXI

All-India Oriental Conference

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inaugural address

By

Air Chief Marshal (Retd.) O. P. Mehra

Governor of Rajasthan

Chancellor, University of Rajasthan

&

Patron of the Conference

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General President of the Conference Dr. Gauri Nath Shastri, Chairman and members of the Organising and Reception Committees of the Oriental Conference, delegates to the Conference and friends :

I am conscious of and grateful for the honour you have bestowed on me by asking me to inaugurate the 31st Session of this very prestigious conference. The event is of significance to us, as Rajasthan as also its premier University—University of Rajasthan—and its capital city, Jaipur are playing host to the Conference. It is my privilege to extend a hearty welcome to ALL the delegates especially those who have travelled long distances and to thank you for holding this Conference at Jaipur. This has given us an opportunity to extend Rajasthan's traditional hospitality to you.

The popular image of Rajasthan is that of a land of the brave and chivalrous who have written its history in letters of gold. It would not be wrong to say that Rajasthan and its people have played a significant role in shaping national history. In the recent past, excavations made in certain parts of the State have revealed the existence of important links with civilisations dating back to 5000 years—possibly earlier than the early Harappan and Mohenjo Daro civilisations—thus entitling Rajasthan to share with some other states the honour and glory that belonged to ancient India. Jaipur, of course, has during its about 250 years of existence contributed significantly to the preservation and revival of Sanskritic studies and such branches of Indology as Astronomy, Astrology and classical dance—the Kathak—as well as classical vocal music.

In the realm of philosophy and religion, Rajasthan's contribution is unique. The poems of Mirabai are a combination of literary grace, psychological insight, moral fervour and mystical heights. She has undoubtedly made a great contribution to the world of scholarship. In living memory her devotionalism has rarely, if ever, been excelled. Her complete self-surrender to the will of God, her preparedness to brave any calamity for attaining spiritual union with the Lord and her prayer JYOTI MEN JYOTI MILAY (to merge her light in the Light Universal) are ample proof of the spiritual heights she reached.

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In the recent past Rajasthan's contribution through the works of Pandit Madhusudanji Oza who undertook Vedic research for over two decades is by any standards outstanding. He is credited with authoring a phenomenal number of books :

18 Mahagranthas—over 150 books on NIGAM

6 Mahagranthas—about 100 odd Volumes on AGAMA

The pity is that this gigantic effort has not reached the hands of successive generations as most of it remains unpublished and even the published literature is not easily available.

Pandit Motilal Sharma, a disciple of Pandit Oza, is also credited with dozens of volumes primarily based on the original work of the great master Pandit Madhusudanji. It is a matter of pride for every Indian to know that the work researched by these intellectual giants is instrumental in establishing that what modern scientists are unearthing today even in such exotic fields as Atomic energy and Space, was not unknown to our people in the pre-historic ages. Unfortunately, owing to our ignorance about the contents of our phenomenally rich literature, we have failed to take advantage of the wealth of knowledge that is our heritage. I do hope this situation will not continue endlessly as even now it is not too late to wake up. I also hope that some organisations like yours or the Government at the Centre or the States will take upon themselves to publish the works of Pandit Madhusudan Oza and encourage research to further the work already done by him and others.

Associated with the Oriental Conference are names of some of the most illustrious sons of our country. These savants and other scholars through vision and guidance have steered this conference for over 3 decades and justly earned for it a reputation amongst the leading learned bodies not only nationally but internationally. Its contribution to Oriental and Indological studies has been truly consequential.

Among the ancient civilizations of the world, that of India occupies a pre-eminent position, a distinction in some manner shared with China, in so far as its traditions have been preserved without a break down to the present day. Even on a conservative estimate, this tradition is at least 4,000 years old. That the quintessential elements of such an old tradition should have survived all the vicissitudes of history is in the life of humanity a very remarkable phenomenon. It is a tribute to the perennial character of Indian thought and philosophy.

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The views of Max Muller and Roman Rolland in respect of India and its heritage are pertinent. The former said :

> If we were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power and beauty that nature can bestow—in some parts a very paradise on earth—I should point to India. If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant—I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself, from what literature we have in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw that corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly a human life—again I should point to India.

Likewise, Romain Rolland expressed the tiew that :

> If there is one place on the face of the earth where all the dreams of living men have found a home from the very earliest days when man began the dream of existence, it is India.

Since your legacy and ch irge are such as would put India on the peak of human glory, this distinguished assembly assumes an importance far above that associated with other concourses of academicians. Whereas the latter reflect the workings—howsoever commendable—of the best Indian brains, your conference represents at its finest the mind and soul of India.

A measure of the immense significance of the present conference is the extent and scope of participation in it. I understand that some 1500 delegates from every nook and corner of the country have registered themselves to take part in it. They represent diverse aspects of Orientalogical and Indological studies but more than that they vividly embody and exemplify the rich diversity of our great country, linguistic, cultural, religious and ethnic. Yet, they also symbolize and enshrine in them that sacred unity which is best called 'Indianness'. The conferenee delegates, therefore, are the best specimens of national integration.

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Growth and development betoken life. It is as true of institutions as of living organisms. It is, therefore, only befitting that the All-India Oriental Conference should have extended its scope over the past 60 years and more to cover a very wide canvas with a view to matching it with the International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and Africa. A mere look at the sections into which the conference is divided is enough to convince anyone of its comprehensive and inclusive scope. The sections are (1) Vedic, (2) Iranian, (3) Classical Sanskrit, (4) Islamic studies, (5) Arabic and Persian, (6) Pali and Buddhism, (7) Prakrit and Jainism, (8) History, (9) Archaeology, (10) Indian Linguistics, (11) Philosophy and Religion, (12) Dravidic Studies, (13) Technical Sciences and Fine Arts, (14) South-East Asian Studies, (15) West Asian Studies, and (16) Local Language, Literature and Culture which means Rajasthani language and literature as also the rich cultural heritage of which we are justly proud.

Collectively these subjects spell history—history in its broadest sense—history of man, his evolving ethos and culture, languages as means of communication between peoples, fine and performing arts and finally religion and philosohy.

> The time span of the historian more so of the orientalist has been extended fantastically by the work of pre-historians, geologists, biologists and archaeologists, and the sciences of man and nature yield new insights and riddles concerning the past of man on our planet. The last two decades have witnessed a remarkable shift of interest from Europe—centered history to the past of the peoples and civilizations of Asia, Africa and Latin America.*
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> The impact of the social sciences has broadened the range of historical materials, enhanced the scientific objectivity of the historian's work, multiplied the tools of investigation, diversified the methods of study, and added new concepts and interdisciplinary possibilities. But the significance of history as a mode of thought and as a comprehensive, synthesizing and unifying system of the science of man has not diminished in any way. As the American historian Page Smith sums up :
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> > History is and must remain pre-eminent among the social sciences, for it is history that brings together the results

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> of the inquiries that the various social sciences carry on and shapes them into a comprehensive account related to the course of historic events.*
>
> History as a branch of knowledge concerned with the past of man, his societies and the interactions between them, has the dual burden of subjectivity of interpretation and objectivity of scientific knowledge. The discipline of history, therefore, partakes of both art and science. May I with your permission take the liberty of saying that the Orientalist must follow the scientific method to collect his evidence of establishing facts as they really happened, and conform to the highest standards of objectivity in this search ? He must shed his own preferences and prejudices and try to recreate the past as it actually existed.*

The basic error seems to be to try to understand the past generations without establishing harmony with their way of thinking, values and ideals. Thus, economic interpretation may "illuminate much history" but it does not explain or answer all questions. For instance, Buddha's enlightenment and his message, which had, crossing national borders and geographical barriers, spread far and wide, across seas and continents, like Sun's light, can be understood only by getting in communion with that age.

The poetic element infuses into dry facts and dead skeletons the meaning and throb of life. Beyond the scientific labour and artistic exposition, there may be the contemplative and philosophical effort to relate the patterns of the past to some larger scheme or process in time and reality. This is the historian's vision. Objective truth, subjective interpretation and poetic vision are thus combined in the discipline of history, which affords to the mind an unique form of experience and a most valuable type of training.* An Orientalist, even more than a great historian, combines knowledge with wisdom, realizes the immense value of science and also its limitations and attempts to bring back to life what is dead and gone and could never be experienced directly. He must be a bit of the scientist, artist, poet, archaeologist, a votary of fine and performing arts and a philosopher, all rolled into one.

The task which is set before us today is that the world should get together with a heightened sense of the dignity of man and the brotherhood of peoples. In recent times, the study of Oriental civili-

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zations has accelerated this process. The affinity of many of the European languages with Sanskrit is affirmed. The similarities of European languages and Sanskrit indicate the extent of the agreement reached by different peoples in the matter of economic organisation, religious thought and social structure.

Nearer home we are engaged in a very onerous and desirable task, namely to achieve enduring National Integration. It is vital that we interpret and rightly too our culture in the interest of preserving our national unity. There have always been two ways of looking at national culture, particularly in a country with such astonishing diversity as India, a broad catholic way, and a narrow, parochial way. As a nation our strength has been our ability to absorb, assimilate and synthesize diverse trends and influences. We face certain disaster if we allow sectarian and intolerant ideas to take root in the country. No one has highlighted this point more succinctly and forcefully than Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Tracing the beginnings and gradual growth of the composite culture of the Indian people, he remarked :

> The origins of this culture may be traced back on the one hand, to the pre-Aryan period, the civilisation of Mohenjadaro etc., and the great Dravidian civilisation. On the other hand, it received a powerful impress from the Aryans who came to India from Central Asia. Subsequently, it was influenced by repeated incursions from the north-west and later by the people who came across the seas from the West. Thus this national culture gradually grew and took shape. It had a remarkable capacity for synthesis and of absorbing new elements. So long as it did so, it was dynamic and living. In later years it lost the dynamic quality and became essentially static which led to weakness in all fields. Throughout India's history we see the two rival and contradictory forces at work—those in favour of synthesis and absorption and those favouring fissiparous tendencies which separate. Today we face the same problem in a different context. There are powerful forces working for unity, not only political but cultural also. There are also forces that disrupt and lay stress on separateness.

The danger against which Pt. Nehru gave a warning is more than real and pressing. There can be no better forum than the All-India Conference of Orientalogists to evolve practical measures through pro-

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per interpretation of our cultural heritage whereby the drift towards national disintegration and disunity may be halted. Social evils like casteism, dowry and religious intolerance must be clearly shown to be contrary to all that India stood and stands for. Universally acknowledged virtues like humanism, tolerance, non-violence and universal brotherhood are deeply enshrined in our cultural heritage. They need to be highlighted and re-emphasised more vigorously now than ever before, as disruptive forces in many parts of the country are threatening to destroy the very fabric of our sovereignty and national character. National integration is the key to survival. It has to be achieved, whatever the cost or sacrifice.

The time has come when we should all work for international integration. One international community is the vision that all great people have had for this world. This would become possible not through political arrangements or economic alliances but as the result of understanding of the ethos and culture of peoples. I have every hope that as time goes on people will feel that the whole world is their home and every culture is their heritage. Mankind has a common root split into different branches—communities. It has no option but to strive for the recovery of its basic origin. The history of the new world, one world, promises to be rich in range and majestic in its scope.

Today the world is eager for the development of a world community based on unity and harmony as distinct from unanimity and uniformity. We must learn from other peoples' beliefs and experiences. We have come to realise that conflicts between countries can no more be settled by wars, which are devastating by their very nature and more so in today's context when science and technology have placed weapons of mass destruction in the hands of man. The differences, if any, between sovereign states require to be reconciled through an understanding of human sentiments and their varied expressions. We must learn to be loyal to the concept of one human race. Exclusive loyalty to an individual nation or group or creed is not good for the world.

The human race is one which is becoming a historical fact. The necessities of the historical process are making the world into one. We stand on the threshold of a new era--the era of the single society. Those who are alive to the problems of the future accept the ideal of the oneness of mankind as the guiding principle of their thought and actions.

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The explorers of the art, literature and thought of the world's varied cultures have a more decisive role to play in shaping the minds of the people than even the political leaders. Let them dedicate themselves in the true spirit of scholarship, which knows no frontiers, to the task of building a new world order, free from hatred, intolerance and fanaticism of every variety. Let us, as enjoined by the Rig Veda, move forward to an era where each of us will respect every man, every race, every culture and every creed.

We have to accept the fact that the present-day world feels the need for an integrated philosophy devoid of localism and particularism and capable of meeting the myriad challenges mankind is faced with. And from where else can such a philosophy emanate if not from the accumulated wisdom of the Orient represented by this august body ?

In conclusion I reiterate the advice of Dr. Rajendra Prasad when he inaugurated this conference's session in 1957 :

> I would request that in pursuit of knowledge, you will remember that you owe a duty not only to the past but also to the present and to the future and that duty is to interpret the past in such a way, to present it to the present in such a way that the present can derive good things and things of great value. You have to study the past with the same interest and with the same object so that you may be able to help the present, understand it better and make it better.

May the Jaipur session of the All-India Oriental Conference which I have great pleasure in inaugurating, be the harbinger of the message of Universal peace and brotherhood which are vital for suffering humanity.

JAI HIND

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*Dr. Prem Kirpal—Presidential Address Punjab History Conference.

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